

Coffee Time

by YappiChick

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Summary: It was a well-known fact around Reach that Cortana was obsessed with coffee. John was especially well-versed in that truth. Major AU.

## 1. Chapter 1

**\*\*Another story that takes place in my "Under the Surface" universe. Part 2 will look familiar; the original version of it was posted under "The Little Details". \*\*If you haven't read "Under the Surface", you're gonna be confused. Just know that it is a major AU. Everything takes place on Earth (though in the same timeframe). No aliens or space battles here. And Cortana is decidedly not a hologram.\*\*A huge thanks goes to manniness for her stellar beta job!\*\***

**\*\*As always, I'd love to know what you think!\*\***

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><p>I. (Takes place after Stomping Grounds)<br>**\*\*1900 Hours, May 19, 2552 (Military Calendar)/**  
>North America, Reach UNSC Military Complex<strong>

His attacker's fist was hurtling towards him; John had only a split second to react.

A second which, despite his uncanny luck, was disrupted by a voice cutting across his comm channel.

\_"Chief, repairs to your armor are nearly complete. I need you to report to Doctor Halsey's lab immediately. And bring me a cup of coffee. Thanks."\_

Cortana.

Her unexpected interruption caused John to be briefly distracted; he barely had time to deflect Kelly's sparring move. Though he managed to block most of the attack, his awkward positioning threw him off-balance. He would have fallen to the floor had Kelly not reached for his arm and pulled him upright.

John nodded his thanks as he straightened.

"New orders?" she asked curiously.

"Maybe. That was Cortana," he replied, grateful. He had been without his suit for too long and missed too many missions because of the damage it had taken.

Kelly looked at him hopefully, "Good to hear. Maybe you'll be able to come back to Blue Team. It's just strange not working with you after so many years."

It was odd for John as well, but he had more than a suspicion that reassignment to the Blue Team was not going to happen.

Working with Cortana, however, was.

News of the successful test had made its way through High Command and the halls of the ONI building. John wasn't sure what his and Cortana's objectives were to be, but Doctor Halsey had already told him that Lord Hood was going to issue his next orders directly.

Which meant, in all likelihood, that he would never work with his Spartan brothers and sisters again.

He noticed Kelly's inquisitive look and shook the thoughts away. He was a soldier and would follow any order given to him until his last breath. Kelly, Fred and the others would do fine without him.

"It's nothing," he assured her before leaving the sparring room.

After showering and changing into his standard issue uniform, John made his way to the ONI building. The guard at the entrance waved him in as his arrival was expected. He took the elevator to the fourth floor.

Seconds later, the doors slid apart and John stepped out, thinking about Cortana's request for coffee. It was certainly the first time anyone had ever asked him to do such a thing; normally his objectives dealt with completing impossible missions, not fetching someone a drink.

Perhaps she and Doctor Halsey were in a sensitive part of the repair process so she couldn't leave the lab to get a coffee, he reasoned. He stopped in front of the drink dispenser and pushed the button marked "coffee".

It wasn't as if bringing her a drink was going to become routine, he reasoned.

After the machine finished dispensing the steaming liquid, John grabbed the cup and made his way to Halsey's lab. When the doors slid

apart, he saw the two women standing next to his armor. The suit looked as new as the day he'd first put it on put it on.

Cortana barely looked away from the readout display on the tablet. "Good. You brought the coffee."

Halsey offered a small smile to him. "Cortana's been eager to finish the repairs. She even gave up her usual coffee break in her efforts to get everything done."

"And it worked too." She set down the tablet and stalked over to him. Without waiting for him to offer it, she plucked the cup from his hand. After taking a small sip, she frowned. "It's black. Who taught you to drink it like that?"

"Cortana..." Halsey warned.

John bristled. Though he'd had a few encounters with Cortana since their initial test, he still wasn't accustomed to her informal way of addressing him. Those in the UNSC either feared or respected him. Cortana treated him as if he were a longtime friend rather than a fellow soldier.

Cortana flashed him an apologetic smile as she set down the paper cup. "Sorry, Chief. I'm not exactly pleasant when I haven't had my coffee."

Halsey nodded slightly, but said nothing to verbalize her agreement. "You were called down here because we're ready to test the suit's interface with your neural link to Cortana," Halsey explained.

John looked around the lab for any other people. His armor was bulky and burdensome-it took at least one other person to help him put it on. He knew the doctor would be uncomfortable in assisting him. Whenever she'd been present while he'd gotten suited up in the past, he'd noticed that she'd always averted her gaze.

Which left Cortana.

Cortana raised an eyebrow, picking up on his awkwardness. She turned to Halsey. "I never read anything in his file about him being shy."

Shy wasn't the word John was thinking. Uncomfortable was more appropriate. AI or not, there was no question that if Cortana helped him put on his armor, it would create a situation that would be awkward for the both of them.

"Dr. Jacobs and his assistant should be here momentarily," Halsey replied. Moments later, the lab doors slid apart and the two men walked in. Halsey gave them a curt nod as she turned away and began talking to Cortana.

John and the other men moved to the side of the lab, near his suit. He forced himself not to wonder if Cortana would respect his privacy as Halsey always had. He focused on getting suited up as quickly as possible.

As the Doctor Jacobs and his assistant continued placing the pieces of his armor on him, John picked up the hushed conversation between

Cortana and Doctor Halsey from behind him.

"The probability of the redundant loop intensifying is still dangerously high," the doctor muttered.

"I understand that, Doctor," Cortana replied stubbornly.

"We don't know if your subroutines will be able to compensate for the increased data. The human brain can only process so much data as once," argued Halsey.

"I've run the analysis, Doctor, and I'm willing to take that risk. But, if Lord Hood isn't convinced that the Master Chief can effectively complete his mission, then they will pull the plug on this. You know that."

"All right, Master Chief, you're all set," Doctor Jacobs said, pulling John's attention away from the women.

John turned around to face Halsey and Cortana. Neither of them showed any outwards signs of concern. The older woman studied John for a moment before straightening her shoulders. "Let's proceed with the test," she said.

For a second, Cortana looked as if she was going to say something, but she simply nodded.

"Cortana and I have been working on the neural link buffer, John, so that you don't experience any of the dizziness that you did before. We're hopeful that we have resolved \_that \_particular issue," Halsey explained, picking up a tablet. John noticed she avoided looking at Cortana.

The AI grabbed his helmet off of one of the desks and held it out for him to take. "Go ahead and put this on."

John did as Cortana had instructed, but he was unable to see anything on his HUD. He flipped up his visor and looked at the two women. "Nothing."

A hint of a smile passed over Cortana's lips. "It wasn't powered on yet, Chief."

Halsey tapped several commands on the tablet. "Now try."

With a flick of his wrist, he moved the visor back into position. All readouts were normal. John nodded. "Everything is green."

Cortana concurred. "All systems seem to check out just fine."

Halsey nodded. "Excellent. I'm going to boost the neural link to simulate your suit running at normal operating levels." She looked at him closely. "If you feel any of the symptoms that you felt during the test, tell me immediately."

"Understood."

Suddenly, John felt the familiar sensation of liquid ice pouring into his skull. The hum he had begun to associate with Cortana intensified, but there were no other side effects.

"How are you feeling, John?" Halsey asked, looking at him closely.

"Fine."

"Good." Halsey turned towards Cortana. "Boosting signal to ninety-five percent. Are you ready?"

Curiously, Cortana seemed to brace herself momentarily. "Do it."

John didn't notice any difference with their link, but Cortana apparently did. He saw her squeeze her eyes shut tightly. She staggered forward.

Impulsively, John reached out to keep her from falling, but she recovered in time.

"I've terminated the link," Halsey announced, studying Cortana. A line of worry appeared on her forehead. "It seems that we have more work to do."

Cortana arched an eyebrow. "Apparently."

The doctor turned to John. "You may remove your helmet, John." She looked at the readout of the tablet briefly. "Lord Hood is waiting for the results of this test." She raised her gaze back to Cortana. "He'll want solutions."

"We all do."

Halsey nodded before leading Doctor Jacobs and his assistant out of her lab.

After he removed his helmet, John kept an eye on Cortana. She seemed to be back to normal. She opened a desk drawer and rummaged through it before pulling out several packets " of sugar, he noted " and then looked up at him.

"There's a redundancy echo on my side of the neural link," she explained without preamble. "If it gets pushed past the default levels, then the echo intensifies causing me to have an extremely painful migraine. Catherine and I were hoping that the changes to the buffers would alleviate that problem. But apparently, we were wrong."

John set down his helmet on the desk, careful not to knock over the cup of coffee he had brought for Cortana. "Maybe there is someone else who is more suitable for the neural link."

She shook her head. "There is no one is more compatible. I promise you that."

"Is that why we were assigned to work together?" he asked.

She gave him a mischievous smile. "Didn't Doctor Halsey tell you? I chose you myself, John."

He inwardly flinched at the use of his first name. "Why me?"

She reached over and picked up the cup of coffee. "It certainly wasn't for your coffee-making skills," she retorted wryly. She ripped open the packets of sugar and dumped the contents in the cup and grabbed a stylus off the table, using it as a stir stick

"Then what was it?"

"Luck." She smirked. "I wasn't wrong, was I?"

## 2. Chapter 2

II. Takes place after "Crashing the Party"

><strong>2345 Hours, August 15, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>Europe, Great Britain, Scotland<strong>

It was a well-known fact around Reach that Cortana was obsessed with coffee.

She might have gotten her initial affinity for the drink from Doctor Halsey, but it hadn't taken long for Cortana to independently develop a love of coffee herself. The caffeine boost allowed her to forestall her body's inevitable need for rest; a necessity when she was running extremely complex diagnostic. ONI techs were hard-pressed to find a time when the AI didn't have a cup of java within her grasp. And when she didn't, they knew to avoid her.

It was her first mission back on Alpha Team since her near-death incident. Halsey had done everything she could to repair Cortana back to the way she had been before the crash in Panama, but the doctor had her limits. Even teamed with Cortana herself, they couldn't undo all of the damage done to her matrix chip. Before she and the rest of Alpha Team had left Reach, Halsey had reminded Cortana that her neural processors ran only at ninety-four percent compared to their previous abilities and warned her to allow time to compensate for that.

Cortana had pointedly ignored the doctor's advice and was now paying the price.

Earlier in the day, ONI had requested several detailed analyses of the base and the surrounding Covenant forces. In the past, Cortana would have been able to complete the tasks and have enough time to prepare herself for the surveillance watch. Tonight, she had overestimated the limits of her subroutines and barely had enough time to upload the data before trekking through the rocky terrain with Johnson to start their shift.

With no coffee.

Things could have been going better.

She settled down on the jagged surface. It was only six hours. She didn't \_need \_coffee to keep her awake.

But, she certainly \_wanted \_it.

Cortana lifted up her high powered binoculars to look at the base ahead of them. The entrance was guarded by three Elite soldiers;

their gold armor bounced off the moonlight. She brought down the binoculars and scanned the cliffs that towered over her and Johnson around them. She knew there were a half dozen UNSC snipers hiding in various positions, ready to take out any threat.

The Red Team's presence had so far gone unknown by the Covenant, but she knew that soon their time would be up. She wished she was in the bunker. At least she wouldn't be sitting in the cold, watching from the distance, wishing she had a cup of coffee at her disposal.

She frowned.

Johnson cocked his head questioningly, sensing her sour mood. "What's wrong? Ya see something?"

His concern was clear. Like John and Captain Keyes, Johnson was interested in Cortana's transition back to Alpha Team.

"No, everything is clear," she assured him. She scooted a pointy rock under her thigh away, fighting the urge to throw it in the valley in front of them. Her frustration was almost ridiculous. It was just a cup of coffee, after all.

Or perhaps not.

Her brow creased. Could her poor time management be a sign of problems with her base code? Maybe she had suffered more damage than they had detected. She ran a quick analysis of her systems. To her relief, she was operating within normal parameters. Which meant one thing: she had been wrong and Halsey had been right.

Damn it.

Johnson nodded at her empty hands. "Where's your cup o' Joe anyway? No watch is complete without your special blend."

Cortana narrowed her eyes. "I don't want to talk about it." She sighed. "It's probably good to not start up that habit again anyway."

The sergeant looked less than convinced.

"Not for me," argued Johnson. "I've seen you without your coffee. Don't get your feelings hurt when I say I feel worse for myself than you."

She knew he was right. She'd have to pick him up a box of cigars if he survived the night. Maybe two.

Cortana drew in a deep breath.

And swore she could smell coffee.

She spun around and saw John approaching the two of them with a pistol in one hand and a familiar container in the other.

"Thank God," Johnson muttered.

"You brought me coffee?" Cortana moved to stand.

"I didn't think Johnson did anything to deserve your wrath," he replied dryly. "Especially on your first mission back on the team."

"Damn right, I didn't," Johnson readily agreed.

John handed the thermos to her which she took, grateful. Before she could analyze how her actions would affect the stoic Spartan, she flung herself at John, careful not to slosh any of the precious liquid out of the top of the cup.

John didn't move.

"I don't know what they taught you growin' up as a Spartan," said Johnson, sounding slightly disappointed. "But I was raised with the idea that if a lady shows you some gratitude, the least you can do is \_act \_appreciative."

Cortana pulled away from John, sheepish grin in place. Despite his numerous visits and causal touches when she was recovering in the hospital on Reach, it seemed as if he wasn't ready for open displays of appreciation. "It's ok, Johnson. The Chief knows it's nothing personal. It's all about the coffee."

The sergeant muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "bullshit" before peering through his binoculars again, giving the two of them what little privacy he could.

She took a careful sip and sighed appreciatively. Her eyebrow rose. "You even remembered the sugar."

"I know how you take your coffee," John said. A small frown passed over his lips.

She ignored the urge to roll her eyes. Just because he, and every other Spartan she had met, preferred his coffee black and thick as oil, didn't mean he could criticize her. "I don't add that much sugar, John," she chided. "Just enough to add a little-"

"Sweetness." Keyes' voice unexpectedly cut into the conversation. "Catherine has told me that enough times over the years." He nodded at his team. "I just got word from ONI. Red Team has been unable infiltrate the system. They're sending us in." He looked at Cortana. "You ready?"

Cortana might have felt defensive at the captain's question if it wasn't for the compassion in his eyes. The brass at ONI might not care how hard Cortana would have to push herself to crack the database, but Keyes did. She met his gaze and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. We're meeting with Delta Team in ten minutes. They'll escort us to the base." His eyes crinkled slightly. "That should be enough time for your coffee break, don't you think?"

Cortana smirked. She had always known there was a reason why she liked Keyes. "Absolutely, sir."

"Good. And Cortana, do us all a favor? Screw the paperwork if it



means you get your caffeine fix."

She took a drink and smiled. "Understood, sir."

### 3. Chapter 3

III. Takes place after "Pushing the Boundaries"

><strong>0430 Hours, September 2, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>Africa, Cairo UNSC Military Complex<strong>

Cortana still didn't think that her reassignment to Alpha Team would improve things between her and John. In fact, knowing his stubbornness, she was willing to bet things were going to remain strained for a long time.

She made her way down the hall, head held high, ignoring the distrustful appraisals of the soldiers she passed on the way to her new lab. When the doors slid apart, she was disheartened.

It was small and poorly furnished. There were two outdated monitors on a small desk where a tablet lay. A tiny holotank sat in the corner. One holoprojector bulletin board was pushed against the back wall. The lighting was the only positive aspect of the room; with its brightness, Cortana could easily forget about the hours that seemed to whiz by when she was working on a complicated project.

She did her best to push away her disappointment. Considering the devastating blow the UNSC had taken after the attack on Reach, she knew that the commodities Lord Hood had provided for her were rare. Cortana reaffirmed her vow to do whatever it took to defeat the Covenant, despite these technological handicaps. The UNSC still had her and she would not give up the fight.

Cortana pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat down. She then called up all the data from the Reach attack and channeled it to the lab computers. Nearly sixty-five percent of the UNSC fleet had been killed that day. The majority of the eastern seaboard had been lost to the Covenant.

As the minutes passed, she became immersed in all the details of the massacre.

Halsey was still missing, despite the UNSC's best efforts to find her.

John was one of the last remaining Spartans. Only he and a handful of Spartans had managed to survive the attack on Reach.

The majority of the UNSC had gone dark. Communication between bases was rare, allowing the fleet time to recover after everything that had happened since Halsey's betrayal.

Cortana was so entrenched in the data she was processing that she didn't hear the door open behind her.

But, it didn't take long for her to detect the familiar scent of sweetened coffee.

There were but a scant few who knew exactly how Cortana enjoyed her

caffeinated beverage. Her heart started beating faster. Could it be that John was ready to see the truth about her? That she knew nothing about Halsey's deception?

A smile passed over her lips. Maybe things were going to be alright, despite the devastation that had occurred. "John..." She twisted her chair and saw a familiar face, but it wasn't the one she was expecting to see. "...son," she awkwardly finished.

"Sorry I ain't the Chief," he said sincerely. "But when I heard that you are back on Alpha Team and cleared of all charges, I thought ya could use this." He held out the cup for her to take. "Took the damn fools long enough to figure things out."

She reached out and took the mug, inhaling the roasted aroma.

Had it only been four days since she'd had a coffee?

"I take it they didn't accommodate your caffeine addiction," Johnson said, leaning on the edge of her desk.

"No." They had treated her like a war criminal. Locked away. Given MREs as food rations. But Ackerson had made sure he had a cup of freshly brewed coffee every time he'd come to interrogate her. The bastard.

She took a long sip from the cup, appreciating the hot liquid as it moved down her throat. Maybe it was because she was now free and clear or maybe it was because it'd simply been so long since she'd had one or maybe being imprisoned and denied such simple pleasures had given everything more value. She wasn't sure which if not all of these were the cause, but that didn't change the fact that the drink was delicious.

"You missed your calling, Johnson. You should have opened your own coffee shop."

"And you thought I was just another pretty face."

She smiled politely before shifting topics. "While you're here, I wanted to say thank you. Your testimony, along with Captain Keyes', was pivotal in my exoneration," she said.

He pulled out a cigar and looked at Cortana questioningly for permission to smoke in the lab. She nodded. Cigar smoke and hot coffee, the scents of Alpha Team. After he lit his stogie, he took a long drag. He turned away from Cortana, exhaling the smoke.

Then, he spoke. "I don't care if you are Halsey's clone. I've been working with you long enough to know that you do your thinking for yourself. You're the best AI we have in the fleet and a damn good soldier."

He bit down on the tip of his cigar. "I'm just glad the brass decided to use common sense for once. Usually they have their heads so far up their ass, it's a wonder they can hear anything," he replied. He looked her straight in the eye. "It's good to have you back, Cortana."

A blush crept over her cheeks. A year ago, if someone had asked her

about the importance of friendships, she would have arrogantly replied that they were superfluous and unnecessary. If Halsey hadn't needed the companionship of others, then certainly she didn't either. But, now, after her ostracism from her team, she'd discovered another difference between her and her creator. She wanted to be around others and valued their friendship.

Still, now was not the time for an emotional moment. Not with Halsey still out there. Not with the Covenant closer to destroying the UNSC than ever before.

She looked up at him. "How did you find out about my reassignment?"

"The Captain called me and the Chief into a private meeting after Lord Hood contacted him. Seemed pretty damn glad to have you back on the team. I know he never bought that traitor bullshit from Halsey."

He might not have, but there was one person-the most important person to Cortana-who did. "John is a different story."

"Yeah, he is," Johnson sighed. "But I'm sure he'll be back to his normal self soon enough. It's just gonna take some time, that's all."

Cortana entered into the UNSC system and tracked John's location. He was in Lord Hood's office. She decided against hacking into the audio feed; she suspected she knew what he was saying to the admiral. That she shouldn't be reassigned to Alpha Team. That she wasn't to be trusted.

"I think you underestimate John's stubbornness, Johnson."

"Maybe. But I know how hard-headed Lord Hood can be too." He gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "Things will be fine before ya know it."

#### 4. Chapter 4

IV. Takes place after "Full Circle"

><strong>1315 Hours, October 22, 2552 (Military Calendar)  
>Pacific Ocean, UNSC Vessel <em>Pillar of Autumn<em>\*\*

John found Cortana asleep, slumped over her desk.

A tablet was hanging haphazardly over the edge of the table. The screens were still streaming data, oblivious to the fact that she had fallen asleep. Several empty paper cups littered the top of the desk.

John stood there with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand and considered his options. It would be best if he let Cortana sleep and catch up on the much needed rested. Since the discovery of the Forerunner database, John didn't think Cortana had gotten more than three or four hours of sleep. She was exhausted; the fact she hadn't stirred at John's arrival silently testified to that fact.

For the past six days, the Autumn had been moving from location to

location in an attempt to avoid being detected by the Covenant. They were under strict orders by Lord Hood himself not to return to Cairo-or any other UNSC installation-until their next objective had been given. Cortana, and the information she possessed, was to be protected at any cost.

John took that order seriously. He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice if it meant giving the UNSC a chance to gain ground in the war.

He stepped away from the desk. Cortana needed sleep more than coffee, he decided. Just as he was about the turn around, Cortana mumbled, "You don't have to leave because you caught me dozing off."

She sat up slowly, wincing. John wondered how long she had been sleeping in that position. She reached up and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Her eyes were clear and alert, despite her weariness.

"How long did you know I was here?" he asked, approaching her desk.

She smirked. "Since you walked in. Convincing myself to wake up, however, was another story entirely. But since I haven't seen you in nearly two days, I dragged myself out of bed. Or off the desk, as it is." Cortana looked down at his bandaged hand. "How is it feeling?"

John lifted his hand as if he could see through the wrapping to the wound beneath. Cortana had done her best to minimize the damage, but the bones had been crashed so badly by the falling rubble that they would never heal correctly. Firing a pistol with his left hand was impossible. Until they were allowed to return to a base where a new hand could be cloned, John would be unable to use two firearms at once.

"It's fine."

Cortana raised her eyebrows but said nothing about his outright lie. Instead, she turned her attention to the item in his hand. "I see that you come bearing a gift."

He passed the paper cup to her. "I thought you could use it. Captain Keyes said you haven't left the lab since I last saw you."

"Well, you can blame ONI for that. I've been working on reports for them nonstop." She took a long drink. "If we ever make it back on base, I'm putting in an acquisition request for a personal coffee dispensing machine. It's ridiculous that I have to go all the way to the hall to get my coffee."

One word caught his attention. "\_If\_"

She put down the cup and tugged at her ponytail. Her hair fell forward. "They're wanting us to breach Australia, John," she said quietly. "The only thing they are debating is whether or not the UNSC is willing to send any more troops on this 'suicide mission'."

John grimaced. Going down there with only the crew of the Autumn would make an extremely tough mission nearly impossible. But he had

faced such odds before. And defied them.

Cortana reached over and took another drink from the cup before pinning him with a concerned look. "I'll be honest with you, whatever is waiting for us is huge, John. And I have a strong feeling that the Covenant know something is there, too. We're going to have a fight on our hands when we stop hiding."

"We'll be ready."

"I've missed hearing that stubborn optimism of yours, John." She reached out and took his uninjured hand, giving it a brief squeeze. Instinctively, he squeezed back.

Realizing what he had just done, John tried to pull away.

She released him with a wistful smile. "Don't worry, John. I remember what you said after Reach." A frown darkened her face briefly before she drew in a long breath. "Despite the other things you said that day-" Guilt crept into John's mind. "-that was one thing I agree with you on. Losing focus of our objective, especially now, is something we cannot do." She eyed him in a way that made him feel uncomfortably exposed. "But, I'd like to think after everything we've been through, that we can at least be friends."

She stood up and held her hand for him to take.

He regarded her briefly. She was right, all that he had experienced with her had made them more than just fellow soldiers fighting a dangerous war. Cortana was one of a select few that John would call a friend.

"I can do that," he agreed, clasping her hand briefly.

She smiled as she let go of his hand. "Good. Now, give a girl some alone time with her coffee."

## 5. Chapter 5

V. Takes place after the sequel to "Under the Surface" (which will be written, I promise!)

><strong>2100 Hours, November 11, 2552 (Military Calendar)

>Africa, Cairo UNSC Military Complex<strong>

"I have something for you."

Cortana looked up from her tablet and saw John standing at the entrance of her lab. He looked tired; stubble darkened his jaw and cheeks. His hair was flat against his skull, a side effect of wearing his helmet for an extended period of time.

It had been just over two weeks since she, John, and the handful of survivors from the Halo campaign had limped back to UNSC-controlled land. They had managed to thwart the Flood outbreak and destroy the Halo compound, but there was still a war left to be fought.

The Covenant were pressing in on their lands and Cortana knew it wouldn't be long until they would strike again. The UNSC was doing all it could to stave off the enemy. Cortana was in charge of the

base's security while John had been temporarily assigned to work with his former Blue Team until a replacement for Keyes was found.

Eight days ago, John and the rest of the Blue Team had received orders to infiltrate a secret Covenant base, code name: Unyielding Hierophant. For the first time since the attack on Reach, Cortana had been unable to accompany John on a mission and, because of the long distance separating them, their neural link was practically useless.

Cortana used all of her hacking skills to do her best to monitor the Spartans' progress, but there were times when he and his team had fallen completely off the grid. Finally, eleven hours ago, she had received a comm transmission from a very tired "but alive!" John, telling they were on their way back to Cairo.

He and the others had arrived on base several hours ago. Immediately, they had been ordered to relay their mission reports to Lord Hood. Cortana had passed the time by working on the Mark VI armor for John.

She raised an eyebrow at his statement. "If it's your after-action report, don't bother giving it to me. I read it as you transmitted it to High Command," she replied.

"It's not." He approached her desk with his hands behind his back. Then he reached forward and placed a small package next to an empty coffee cup.

Cortana glanced at the bag before her head shot up, her eyes widened, and she gazed at John in disbelief. A trace of a smile curved his lips. "This is coffee. Real coffee."

"It is." His voice was laced with something unusual: amusement.

That didn't stop Cortana from grabbing the bag and pressing it to her nose. She inhaled deeply, savoring the bitter scent of the beans. Coffee from actual coffee beans rather than the artificial coffee crystals that the UNSC had been forced to use was extremely rare. And yet she held two precious pounds in her hands.

She reluctantly set down the bag as she looked at John. "Tell me you didn't kill a Covenant commander just to intercept his delivery of coffee."

"No. This was a thank you gift from Admiral Jackson for finding his daughter during the mission."

She leaned back in her chair, appraising him suspiciously. "And he just happened to give you coffee?"

The amusement fell off his face. Suddenly, he looked extremely awkward.

Gotcha.

"John?"

He fidgeted slightly. "I might have mentioned something about wanting to bring some back to base."

Jackson's coffee stash was legendary amongst the UNSC so it was no surprise that John knew he could ask for it, but it still left the question, "Why?"

He looked her directly in her eye. "You deserve something for your actions at the Halo Installation."

Finally, she understood what he was thinking. The award ceremony, which was scheduled to take place in two days, had left John uncharacteristically bothered. "You're still upset about that, huh?"

"Cortana, you stopped me from activating Halo," he replied as if that was enough of an answer. "You should be at the ceremony, too."

"I will be there," she countered. She would \_not\_ \_allow\_ herself to feel flustered at John's advocacy for her.

He scowled. "You know what I mean."

Of course she did. For not being very verbose, John had been quite vocal about the necessity of including Cortana during the ceremony. High Command's response had been direct and unequivocal; there was no need to acknowledge Cortana because she did exactly what she was programmed to do.

"Don't worry about it, John. AIs, even ones that save the fate of the planet, aren't technically soldiers, or humans from ONI's point of view, so I can't get any of those shiny medals you seem so fond of. Besides, " she nodded towards the bag of coffee beans, "I've got everything I could possibly want."

John didn't seem too convinced. "Cortana-"

Without allowing her subroutines to stop her, she stood up. She knew that there were always going to be some people in High Command who saw her as nothing more than a machine.

"It's enough that you want me to be there," she whispered. Then, as if it was the most natural thing to do, she stood on her tiptoes and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek. The warmth of his skin caressed her lips. She allowed her eyelids to flutter closed for two heartbeats before pulling away.

There was nothing significant about the kiss, she told herself. It was a friendly gesture that conveyed her appreciation more than words ever could.

That was all.

It didn't explain her elevated heart rate or the sudden fluttering in her stomach, though.

She met his stunned expression without fear. A faint, but distinct blush colored his cheeks.

He said nothing for several seconds as he searched her face. Finally, the shock faded and the faint smile that he had walked in with appeared again. "Are you sure your feelings aren't anything personal?"

Because I thought they were only about the coffee," he rumbled, referring to a simpler time before betrayal and despair clouded their outlook on the war.

She allowed herself a grin as they stepped back, thinning but not breaking the tantalizing pull between them. She'd missed this. She'd missed him. "You caught me." She nodded towards the bag. "When I convince myself to crack open the bag, I'll let you know. The least I can do is offer you a cup."

"You don't owe me anything," he said gently.

Maybe not, but Cortana couldn't think of anyone she would rather share it with. "I know that, John," she said sincerely.

He considered her for a moment, and then nodded. "No sugar."

"No sugar," she repeated.

He nodded once more and headed for the door.

Before he reached it, she called, she called, "And John?"

He stopped and swiveled around to face Cortana, giving her a questioning glance.

An impish smile passed over her lips. "You're quite handsome when you're blushing."

End  
file.